

## Ram Leela 2011 comes to life in living colors

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By Nik Nikam and Usha Mehra



Dr. Arun Verma, left, and his wife Vinni, right, with leading characters in Ram Leela 2011.

Houston: Ram Leela 2011 educated, enlightened, and entertained in excess of 1,500 audience for more than three hours, on November 13, 2011, at the Cullen Performance Hall, University of Houston, Texas. After three months of preparation, hundreds of local artists and enthusiasts put their blissful and elegant efforts to bring the Ram Leela 2011 to life. This year's Ram Leela included colorful costumes, mystical music, and dazzling lights on an artistic stage.

The special effects included Hanuman flying to Lanka and to bring back Sanjeevani for Lakshman, a twelve-foot Taraka, and Ahalya ascending to heaven. The impact on the audience was exhilarating. The English subtitles were an additional welcome this year.

The theatrical presentation moved through the seven stages (Kaands) of Ram Leela, as described by Goswami Tulasidas. The event included a short preview of Ram Leela 2010, clips from behind the scenes in preparation for Ram Leela 2011, and names of sponsors. The preview video produced by Dr. Nik Nikam, set the stage and mood for a spectacular Ram Leela 2011. The Ram Leela 2011 production was choreographed and directed by Kusum Sharma of Shri Natraj School of Dance, who specializes in Bharatnatyam, Kathak, Folk, Western, Bollywood Dance & Theater, and Drama Acting.

Under the direction of Kusum Sharma, producer of shows like Mughal-E-Azam in the past years, the Ram Leela 2011 captivated the audience with synchronized melodious Ram Bhajans, exquisite dance sequences, special effects, and extravagant set decors, which brought each character to life by his or her excellent performances and highlighted story lines.

Simmi Khanna managed the stage, orchestrating the performers and curtain operations with brilliant coordination and esteemed patience. Rajpal Hodekar did a wonderful job handling stunt and pyro technicians. Ketan Mistry from Mandap Creations did an outstanding job, along with Props Team of Sukhdeep Kohli, Sacchin Sharma, Dhaval Mistry, and Arun Kumar in ornating the stage for each scene. The make-up of the artists was done by Ravi Puri & Smt. Kalasudha Devi Dasi.

The Ram Leela 2011 was produced by Shri Sita Ram Foundation, under the auspicious guidance of Dr. Arun Verma. Master of Ceremonies for the evening were: Ms. Abha Dwivedi and Gopal Aggrawal.

The invocation prayer by Ms Usha Mehra and lighting of the lamps by the event sponsors led the Ram Leela 2011 beginning with Bal Kaand, the first phase (kaand) of Ram Leela, where the audience was greeted with a musical dance by young children, highlighting Ram as a child. Bal Ram was beautifully portrayed by two years old Sifat Kohli.

Once the royal prince grew, Sage Visvamisra (Played by Dhaval Mistry) appears and asks for Ram and Lakshman to be sent with him. Dashrath (played by Sukhdeep Kohli) sent an emotional jolt through the auditorium, as his sons Ram (played by Vipin Sharma) and Laxman (played by Sachin Sharma) were taken away by sage Vishvamisra

Followed by killing of Tarika, the trio of Ram, Lakshman and Vishvamitra appear in the court of King Janaka (being played by Ram Sharma) where the King had arranged a Dhanusha Yagya and Swayamvara for his daughter Sita (being played by Kusum Sharma).

As Sita being Ram's eternal consort (shakti), there was fixation of gaze between Ram (being played by Vipin Sharma) and Sita (being played by Kusum Sharma) on their first meeting, in Pushpa Vakita.

King Janaka challenges all the princes to attempt to break the dhanusha, and the first person to accomplish that would marry his daughter Sita. The contest filled the ambiance in the auditorium to a huge burst of laughter. When prince after prince failed to win King Janaka's challenge, the King became frustrated and expressed anguish that his daughter may never find the right prince.

Moments later, that anguish was followed by a booming applause from the audience when Ram effortlessly picked-up the bow and broke it into two pieces.



Ram and Sita in a scene from Ram Leela.

The highlight of the first part of the show was the delightful celebration of the marriage of Sita to Ram that included a fragrance of romance and fixation of gaze by Sita.

Kaikeyi, (played by Seema Gupta) the third wife of Dashrath, under a wicked influence of vicious Manthra, her maid (played by Surabhi Gaur), brings King Dashrath on to the floor in utter dismay, 'cause of her demands. Kaikeyi, first insists that her son Bharat be made the king of Ayodhya. Second, she demanded that Ram be sent to the forest for fourteen years. That sent a chill to Dashrath and the entire audience. Philosophers may argue whether it was Kaikeyi, Manthra, or the predestined ordain that sent Ram and Laxman to the forest. Dashrath's demise, a few days after Ram leaves for the forest, displayed the father's love for son Ram and human frailty.

Ravan's (played by Arun Manikantan) sister Surpanakha (played by Runmee) Barbara) tries to entice Ram in the forest to marry her. Ram says Laxman is single and she can talk to him. She tries to entice Laxman to marry her. Laxman questions how she could change her mind so quickly to marry a servant, when she had come to pursue the Master (Ram), in the first place. When she forces Laxman, he defaces her by slicing off her nose. Angry and hurt, Surpanakha lands in Ravan's court in Lanka and provokes her brother for revenge, setting the stage for the well known battle between Ram and Ravan.

In the forest, Sita falls victim to a demon disguised as a charming deer, and sends Ram in search of it. When she crosses the "Laxman Rekha," and demon Ravan abducts her to Lanka, the course of the Ram Leela takes a pivotal turn.

Next, Hanuman (played by Kalpesh Patel) introduces Ram and Laxman to Sugriva (the King of Monkeys, played by Vinay Karna). Sugriva's army of monkeys promises to help Ram in bringing back Sita. Hanuman makes a giant leap to Lanka and gives Sita Ram's ring in Chitra-Koota, where she is imprisoned by Ravan. It was interesting to watch Hanuman surrendering himself to Ravan's army just to show his might in Ravan's court. A sense of jubilation swept across the auditorium when Hanuman set-a-blaze the entire Lanka with his burning tail. Ram, along with an army of monkeys and bears, builds a bridge across Lanka.

Ram sends Angad (Played by Abhinav Kumar), his messenger, to give Ravan an opportunity to make peace and return Sita. Ravan's arrogance knew no bounds. He ignored the warnings from his brother Vibheeshan, his wife Mandodari, and many others. Ignited by Surpanakha's (his sister) anger, Ravan sets on course of self annihilation.

The evil demon in him finally succumbs to the mighty power of Lord Sri Ram, on the battle field, and he finally falls motionless on the ground, which brings a huge applause from the audience. Ram crowns Vibheeshan as the King of Lanka.

Finally, in the Uttar Kaand, the audience was treated to the coronation of Ram as the King of Ayodhya, which was accented by a beautiful dance from a group of ladies, illuminating the occasion with candles.

Dr. Arun Verma of Shri Sita Ram Foundation thanked more than hundred artists and countless volunteers who made Ram Leela 2011 come to life in living colors. He thanked, "Mandap Creations," for providing the stage creations and the many sponsors for their contribution and support, Hindu Students Association, Sewa International volunteers among others.

The Ram Leela was a depiction of the very essence of life and its purpose. It included the childhood, parenthood, dedication, devotion, truth, austerity, grace, and love among many other qualities. It spelled out the ill effects of anger, greed, and lust. It demonstrated the good effects of service, respect, and commitments. It was a sensational experience that is worth watching time and time again.

SOURCE: Voice of Asia (Nov 18, 2011 Issue)